

**Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> February 2021**

**Daniel 5:1-31 (The writing's on the wall)**

**Talk by Andrew Griffiths, Prayers by Julian Providence**

Hi, my name is Andrew and thanks for downloading the talk for St John's church for Sunday 7 February. I will be reading from Daniel 5, giving a short talk and then Julian will be leading our prayers, before we end.

This passage reminds us of the power that God has – he is more powerful than the most powerful person in the world. And he not only loves us, but calls us to be his ambassadors in the world. And because we are His ambassadors, we have the important duty to speak truth to the earthly powers. To speak the truth of God's power, love, kingdom, justice and hope. So, as we read Daniel 5, let's reflect on how Daniel spoke truth to power, and how he became a messenger of God in his words and actions.

**Reading: Daniel 5**

*King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them. <sup>2</sup> While Belshazzar was drinking his wine, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father<sup>[a]</sup> had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. <sup>3</sup> So they brought in the gold goblets that had been taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. <sup>4</sup> As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.*

*<sup>5</sup> Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. <sup>6</sup> His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his legs became weak and his knees were knocking.*

*<sup>7</sup> The king summoned the enchanters, astrologers<sup>[b]</sup> and diviners. Then he said to these wise men of Babylon, 'Whoever reads this writing and tells me what it means will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed round his neck, and he will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom.'*

*<sup>8</sup> Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant. <sup>9</sup> So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled.*

*<sup>10</sup> The queen,<sup>[c]</sup> hearing the voices of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. 'May the king live for ever!' she said. 'Don't be alarmed! Don't look so pale! <sup>11</sup> There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. Your father, King Nebuchadnezzar, appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. <sup>12</sup> He did this because Daniel, whom the king called Belteshazzar, was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve difficult problems. Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means.'*

<sup>13</sup> So Daniel was brought before the king, and the king said to him, 'Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my father the king brought from Judah?' <sup>14</sup> I have heard that the spirit of the gods is in you and that you have insight, intelligence and outstanding wisdom. <sup>15</sup> The wise men and enchanters were brought before me to read this writing and tell me what it means, but they could not explain it. <sup>16</sup> Now I have heard that you are able to give interpretations and to solve difficult problems. If you can read this writing and tell me what it means, you will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed round your neck, and you will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom.'

<sup>17</sup> Then Daniel answered the king, 'You may keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else. Nevertheless, I will read the writing for the king and tell him what it means.'

<sup>18</sup> 'Your Majesty, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendour. <sup>19</sup> Because of the high position he gave him, all the nations and peoples of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled. <sup>20</sup> But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. <sup>21</sup> He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like the ox; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and sets over them anyone he wishes.'

<sup>22</sup> 'But you, Belshazzar, his son,<sup>[d]</sup> have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. <sup>23</sup> Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honour the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways. <sup>24</sup> Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription.'

<sup>25</sup> 'This is the inscription that was written:

*mene, mene, tekel, parsin*

<sup>26</sup> 'Here is what these words mean:

*Mene<sup>[e]</sup>: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.*

*Tekel<sup>[f]</sup>: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.*

*Peres<sup>[g]</sup>: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.'*

<sup>29</sup> Then at Belshazzar's command, Daniel was clothed in purple, a gold chain was placed round his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom.

<sup>30</sup> That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians,<sup>[h]</sup> was slain, <sup>31</sup> and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two.<sup>[i]</sup>

## Talk

There is a rhythm to the stories of Daniel – we see a claim to greatness from the Babylonian king, followed by an intervention from God that needs interpreting, and the interpretation from Daniel. And there is a reason for this rhythm. Daniel is a book all about God’s power – and this message was especially important to the Israelite people, who had been yanked from their homes and brought to a strange land. It was in this exile that God showed that He was powerful beyond any place, nation or ruler.

And the repetition of Daniel, the rhythm of the book, emphasises this again and again. Daniel had been brought to Babylon to demonstrate the power of Nebuchadnezzar, yet instead, God used Daniel to show how He was ultimately in control. The book of Daniel is all about how God did to Nebuchadnezzar what Nebuchadnezzar was trying to do to Daniel.

But in our passage Nebuchadnezzar is gone – he has died and Belshazzar has taken control. Our passage opens in the court of Belshazzar, who is lording it up. He’s having a party, with his wives (plural) and concubines (plural), and he has decided to get out the family silver. Although, in this case, the family silver is actually gold and silver. And it has been stolen from the temple in Jerusalem.

In fact, Belshazzar never was king of Babylon – our translations use the word ‘father’ in the loosest sense, when predecessor might be more appropriate. Belshazzar was Nebuchadnezzar’s grandson – his father Nabonidus was Nebuchadnezzar’s son and was the king at the time of the fall of Babylon to the Persians.

Belshazzar was really the classic teenager, then, in our story – his Dad was out and he was having a party. But the party takes a remarkably Roald Dahl-ish turn, with the writing on the wall, from a disembodied hand. It always really reminds me of Mathilda here, not sure about you?!

Mene, mene, tekel, parsin.

This was written in aramiac, a language with roots in ancient Babylon. But written in a way that they confused the king, who needed to understand them and their meaning. And then enter Daniel, with his interpretation of how Belshazzar has been weighed, found wanting and would meet his end that very night.

There are a lot of aspects of this story that are darkly comic – how Belshazzar’s knees knocked when he saw the hand writing, and the bit that I’ve found most amusing – that Daniel says he doesn’t want the honours Belshazzar promises him, gets them anyway and they last precisely one evening before the Persians take the city.

Now, the order of the chapters in Daniel is a bit odd, as they jump around a bit chronologically, but there is a clear reason why this chapter is where it is. It is there because it is a clear contrast with the previous chapter. For those who remember last week, we read about how Nebuchadnezzar had shown humility before God, having been through seven years of exile. Belshazzar, in contrast does not humble himself – he exalts himself to a position of power and authority that does not belong to him and does not learn the lessons from Nebuchadnezzar.

The key verses for this are 22-24: <sup>22</sup> “But you, Belshazzar, his son, <sup>[d]</sup> have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. <sup>23</sup> Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honour the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways. <sup>24</sup> Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription.

Humility before God is a key theme of Daniel – and our chapter outlines how fragile human power can be, whilst how everlasting God’s power is. Belshazzar clearly thought himself untouchable – the most powerful man in the most powerful city. But that night he was killed, his kingdom conquered and divided. Whilst he partied with the stolen goods, the army of the Persians must have already been outside the city.

Men like this, normally men let’s be honest, can feel so powerful, but this power never lasts forever. It is fleeting and fragile. At the moment when Belshazzar thought himself above all things, he was actually at his most vulnerable – his kingdom and life were about to be taken from him.

This is the power of God – He is powerful beyond all things, beyond all people, all kingdoms, and all challenges. If we put our trust in other things, we will lose it all. But trust in God, and we will never be let down. As Isaiah 40:8 says: ‘The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.’

I’d also like to emphasise another aspect of the story of Daniel 5, one it shares with a lot of others in the book. And that is the fearlessness of Daniel. He spoke truth to power, knowing that he was answerable to (and protected by) a greater power. Daniel stood before a king, who was using the holy things stolen from Daniel’s homeland disrespectfully, knowing the insult he was giving – showing off his power to do whatever he wanted to whomever he chose. And Daniel stood there and told him he would be killed that evening.

Daniel did not flinch, he did not sugar coat what he had to say with all niceties and obsequious language one might expect. He simply told the truth, recognising that he answered to a higher power – the God of all truth.

This is not just Daniel’s role – it is ours as well. We are called to do the same – maybe not quite in the dramatic circumstances that Daniel found himself in – but we are called to do speak truth to power in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in. This is why I get so irritated when people say that religion and politics don’t mix. Of course they do, they always have! Clearly the church should not endorse certain political parties – they are all human constructs and no one is perfect. But politics is about how society orders itself and makes decisions, and Christ had more to say about how power should be used than about almost anything else.

Our passage this morning tells us of the fragility and futility of political power – how God transcends and overcomes all powers. Jesus came to bring the Kingdom of God – a political entity. So, Christians absolutely should be involved in politics – speaking truth to power. The church has a role to play in holding authorities to account.

This is what the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights said at the beginning of a report on the UK in 2018:

The UK is the world's fifth largest economy, it contains many areas of immense wealth, its capital is a leading centre of global finance, its entrepreneurs are innovative and agile, and despite the current political turmoil, it has a system of government that rightly remains the envy of much of the world. It thus seems patently unjust and contrary to British values that so many people are living in poverty. This is obvious to anyone who opens their eyes to see the immense growth in foodbanks and the queues waiting outside them, the people sleeping rough in the streets, the growth of homelessness, the sense of deep despair that leads even the Government to appoint a Minister for suicide prevention and civil society to report in depth on unheard of levels of loneliness and isolation.

14 million people, a fifth of the population, live in poverty. Four million of these are more than 50% below the poverty line, and 1.5 million are destitute, unable to afford basic essentials. The widely respected Institute for Fiscal Studies predicts a 7% rise in child poverty between 2015 and 2022, and various sources predict child poverty rates of as high as 40%. For almost one in every two children to be poor in twenty-first century Britain is not just a disgrace, but a social calamity and an economic disaster, all rolled into one.

When the church, when we, see injustice like this, we are called to speak truth to power. When St Johns sees it in the growth of need that our Food Bank struggles to meet, when we see it in the staggering personal debt that our CAP centre tries to help with, and when we see it in the personal stories of loneliness and sadness that are ever present in times like this. These are the times when we are called to be like Daniel and speak truth to power. We are called to act with integrity and honesty – to speak for justice and to preach God's mercy. This is how we show the world the love that God has for it; how we show the world the values of the coming Kingdom of God.

When Daniel saw the corruption, greed and pride of Belshazzar, he called it out. How can we do the same in a world crying out for justice?

Let's pray

Dear God, we thank you for the example of Daniel.

We thank you that he was not afraid of the power of Belshazzar, but instead looked to you. We thank you that he acknowledged and showed others that your power is greater than all others.

We pray that we will learn from this example, that we will speak out against poverty, suffering and injustice.

We pray that we will act with integrity, live with honesty, speak for justice and preach God's mercy.

We pray for the suffering world around us – that Your kingdom will come and our world will be healed.

In your name we pray.

Amen

## Intercessions

And now Julian will continue with our prayers

Let us pray...

Lord you know these remain difficult and painful times for your world as millions struggle with the impact of losses in their lives - losses of time, opportunity, education, relationships, social connection and mental health. And we remember the losses of life and health for millions also.

You also know how each one of us has been affected by the pandemic. Though we might not always feel it leave it Lord, by faith we know that you remain with us - you are beside us through the hardest of days and on our better days and all the days in between. You watch over us. You see our hearts and minds and your love remains deep and constant and unwavering for us your children.

Help us to continue to seek to rest in the great love that you have for us - to hold on to that childlike trust that you have not abandoned us and where we feel our strength is ebbing, Holy Spirit lift and strengthen us to press deeper into the Lord's presence where we will find comfort and rest for our souls. Lord you are our God "who makes a way in the wilderness and streams the wasteland" (Isaiah 43:19). Help us to perceive even in the midst of these desert times the work you are doing in our lives, drawing us closer to you and changing us to become the people you want us to be. Would you seal into us all that you have taught us through these difficult days so that we will remember your faithfulness when the better days come.

We pray for our church and those of our family, knowing that you hear our prayers and are close to those of us in need at this time. We remember Audrey that you will stabilise her condition, for Linda's grandparents, for you to continue strengthen and heal Karim's father, for Val's continued healing and mobility, for Alison's sister and sister-in-law, for Marcella to be found a new job, for Rose and for Stan. We thank you for answered prayer.

We pray for others who have coronavirus or who are living with or caring for those do. Place your hand of protection over them.

Please bring before the Lord anyone you know who is in need intervention or give him thanks for any answered prayer...

We continue to pray for CAP and the Foodbank and all the work Lin, Rachael and Gareth are doing during these very testing times. Please as ever will you sustain them to carry the heavy burden of practical, emotional and spiritual needs that people bring. We thank you at this time they have secure funding and please bring the right people forward as volunteers to support the work.

We thank you for Amaze Penge and for how you show your love to those families. We ask for your blessing on Cherry as she organises the group and meets with them. Continue to make it the place of refuge and support those families need.

We lift St John's School to you, asking you to sustain and bless the staff and to safeguard the children. Again we pray that those parents and children who are struggling with education and home life under lockdown will get the help they need.

We continue to pray for the boiler replacement, thanking you so much for bringing in the means to fund this much needed work. You are so faithful and good to us. We asked for you to watch over the work and straighten out any difficulties that may arise.

We pray for the fitter who had his tools stolen that you would replace his losses help him recover from this upset.

We lift Alpha to you, asking that your Holy Spirit will continue to lead and inspire it. Holy Spirit would you also guard and nurture the seeds you have planted in those who come to hear your word and do not let the evil one steal them away.

We do not forget that as a church you are bringing to us a new leader. We pray for their preparation and for us to be ready to follow where you will lead us next with our new family at Holy Trinity. Hold us and bind us as a family even through these difficult times of not meeting face-to-face. Help us to find ways of being family and find the encouragement to continue to meet.

We turn now to our world in need...

We thank you for all the services we have relied on throughout the pandemic - for our health services, emergency services, supermarkets, public transport, street cleaners and rubbish collectors and all those who make our lives more comfortable. We are grateful for them and we pray your strength for those who provide for us that you would keep them safe. Please keep your hand of protection over the National Health Service. We pray for exhausted and traumatised staff for relief from the pressure of caring for so many sick and dying people. We pray our government would provide the aftercare staff need.

We pray Lord that you would let compassion and wisdom rule between Europe and the UK in sharing vaccine supplies. We ask for compassion and wisdom to rule that richer nations will be motivated by what is morally right and best for our world and share supplies with poorer nations. We thank you that we have a vaccine and that so many are receiving it so quickly.

We lift the US government into your hands. Please guide and steer this new administration on paths of doing what is right for the US and the world. We ask this new government will bring peace and restoration and you will use it to achieve your purposes for the nation. We pray Joe Biden's knowledge of you guide him he will hear your voice.

We remember the many conflict zones around the world and countries where there is oppression. We remember Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, China, Russia and North Korea and most recently Myanmar and so many other places. We remember the failures of our world are the consequences of sin but we thank you that you have not abandoned the world but loved it so much that you redeemed us through the blood of your son. Please soften the hearts of leaders of oppressive regimes. Touch their consciences with your truth and righteousness and open their eyes to the evil they are doing. Raise up voices in those nations who will prevail with reason and justice and we pray for people suffering under those regimes that you, all powerful God, will break the yoke of their oppression.

Finally we pray to our Father who always hears us...

***Our Father in heaven***

***Hallowed be your name***

***Your kingdom come***

***Your will be done earth as in heaven Give us today our daily bread***

***Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us***

***Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil***

***For the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory are yours now and forever.***

***Amen***

Amen

Thank you for listening.

God Bless.